



Interview

Venezuela and the Popular Movement



An interview with Roland Denis

By Raul Zelik, translated by Gregory Wilpert

Roland Denis was a grassroots organizer during the 1980s in the leftist movement known as Popular Disobedience. He has always been connected with Venezuela's popular movements and is the author of a book on the Caracazo, the rebellion and riots of February 1989. From 2002 to 2003 he was vice-minister of Planning and Development in the Chavez government.

RAUL ZELIK: Your boss, Felipe Perez, and you have recently left the ministry. You promoted a policy that treated development as a problem of social and organizational processes. In this sense, you strengthened local power and self-government. Few ministers have stayed more than ten months. In your case, one has to ask if your exit means a change of direction for the government.

ROLAND DENNIS: Rather than a change of direction, I would say that we see an absence of direction. There are general principles of the Bolivarian revolution: participative democracy, struggle for a multi-polar world, resistance against economic empires, construction of a solidaristic and alternative economy.

Felipe Perez and I tried to interpret these principles in a radical way. "Radical" not in the sense of "extremist," but in the sense of consequences, of "going to the roots." We tried to deepen community control, to give communities the power that is needed to develop new relations with the state; relations of co-governance and co-management. This practice caused re-

sistance from existing institutions, from the "old state" that continues to exist, in spite of the changes.

You also requested that Chávez assume more rigorous measures against corruption.

Not just against corruption. With respect to the World Bank, to the IMF, to bank power in general, the fiscal problem. In all these aspects, where we moved from a general discourse to concrete policy, there were clashes within the state apparatus. That, at least, is my impression.

Are there political conflicts between the left and the right within governmental parties or are different teams fighting for positions?

The essence of states is that they are arenas for the fight for hegemony. The real powers constantly try to make it worth their interests. In this sense, this is not a fight between left and right. The Venezuelan state has been obstructed ever since the April 11, 2002 coup attempt. While the revolutionary movement made an impressive leap in those days—we should not forget that it was the popular movements that defeated the 47-hour dictatorship of Pedro Carmona—the state has assumed a more conservative position since then. Chávez looked for—which for me was one of his larger errors—a dialogue with the putschist opposition and yielded to them on several points. During the oil shutdown in December 2002, the government had to radicalize again, as a result of pressure from the outside, because this coup attempt was also overcome by the grassroots organizations.

This is what I call the "obstruction of the state." There is no concrete policy in the face of specific problems such as agriculture, international relations, development, and industrialization. There are only

general speeches—for example, look at all of the talk about endogenous development and the support for the solidaristic economy. But as soon as one tries to convert this politics into practice, there is much fear because one knows that an alternative economic policy would deeply transform the society.

Many ask why is there a counterrevolution if there has been no revolution? The U.S. and Spain openly supported the 2002 coup. What would happen if the transformation were deepened?

The intervention is already a fact. The U.S. wants us to impose the FTAA by any means necessary, which would perpetuate the existing relations between North America and the Latin American countries. If Venezuela rejects this proposal, it automatically becomes an enemy of the U.S.

I do not believe that the ambiguous attitude of the Chávez government has to do with fear of intervention. Rather, it is a consequence of a lack of clarity, debates, and confidence in the capacity of the self-governance of the people. The inhabitants of the barrios unconditionally supported the government during the coups, risking their lives. But the state hardly reaches out to the barrios. There is a closed, almost fort-like conception of power.

Is this phenomenon due to the old bureaucracies that still occupy 98 percent of the state apparatus, to the concepts of the old left that are in the government, or to the influence of the military?

The things are mixed. It is the culture of the Venezuelan state and their system of parties; it is the military; it is the old left with their Leninist concepts of state power, of vanguard and vertical control. Our constitution speaks of a participative democracy—a democracy in which the communities have a protagonist role. If anything has become clear in this year as vice-minister, it is the experience that self-government is possible, a new state is possible, different relations between government and communities are possible. There have been impressive horizontal discussions about the use of the budget and the development of concrete projects. The only problem was that within the state apparatus there was great fear of these changes.

For foreigners the political panorama in Venezuela is quite confused. In Colombia, there are historical reference points—the political and insurgent organizations have, in one way or another, an influence on the social movements. Venezuela, on the other hand, does not seem to have any organic structures of the left. In this sense, one cannot compare Venezuela with Colombia. Here all the traditional political organizations—as much of the left as of the right—disappeared.

The guerrilla groups of the 1960s and 1970s were defeated. The parties of left and right—Democratic Action [member of the Socialist International] and COPEI [member of the International Christian-Democrats]—also crumbled.

In other Latin American countries, the state is an instrument of the elites to guarantee the accumulation of capital. Unlike this, the Venezuelan state became the site of deprived capitalist accumulation. The only source of wealth in this country is the oil rent. All of the structures that moved within this state—unions, political parties of the right and of the reformist left—sank. They had become part of the deteriorating accumulation mechanism. That is why, in the early 1970s, we left the concepts of armed vanguard parties behind. The only viable exit seemed to be a massive insurrection supported by the parts of the system that could change the correlation of forces substantially. This was the military. We joined an alliance of actors who wanted to destroy the state. This concept finally became a reality with the popular rebellion of the Caracazo in February 1989 and the two military insurrections in February and November 1992.

The consciousness that came during this phase does not have anything in common with the political actors that one knows from the developed Western societies: they are not parties, organizations, or unions. You have to go all the way to the communities or the towns, to find the new actors. We called this dynamic the Popular Constituent Process. This is why you cannot describe the Venezuelan process using the traditional political categories.

The parties of the Patriotic Pole—the Fifth Republic Movement [Chavez' political party, MVR] Fatherland for All [PPT: comparable perhaps to a small Brazilian PT], and We Can [Podemos, Social-Democratic]—do they play a larger role then?

As mobilization apparatuses, perhaps. But this lack of a political line is part of the dilemma. These groups do not represent clear political projects. Chávez has tried to adopt the demands of popular movements and to consider the real conditions within the state. In this sense, it is necessary to applaud him, since he could have played another card and moved away from his base. But it is also necessary to indicate that the Venezuelan state continues to be the old state. It is a space of private accumulation, where the political parties do not fight for ideological hegemony, but for positions. The parties of the Patriotic Pole continue to be part of this game, which evidently is in contradiction to the principles of the revolutionary process. Often the Venezuelan reality is misinterpreted. Here there are three worlds. There is a revolutionary process that is not just represented by the government, but by the popular

movements. Then there is the government, which often does not assume clearly defined positions. Finally, there is the opposition of the oligarchy and of the middle-classes who are ideologically controlled by the former.

Is there a transformation process or not?

Yes, of course. There is an organization process from below that is unheard of. They are creating an alternative economy and cooperatives. In many areas, a participative and active democracy is being developed. All of this did not exist in other revolutions or reform projects. Why is our reality different? Because it is a constituent process. The government is not the vanguard of the project and, for this reason, the process goes beyond the government of Chávez.

What would be necessary to radicalize the process? What steps would the government have to take? Or can only the social movements deepen the process?

I do not demand much from the state; in principle only two things. First, that it guarantees the efficiency of its management and adopts measures against corruption. Second, that it continues working on maintaining a wall against the fascist forces. The rest we can do ourselves. A new society cannot be constructed by decree. The role of a government is to enable the protagonism of the masses, without imposing a direction on it.

We have defended the government and Chávez and will continue defending them, because they represent a wall of protection. But this does not mean that we are completely identified with them. The government not only restrained the right, but on many occasions also the popular movements and the social process. For me "the revolution within the revolution" would occur if the state began to govern with the masses—not by giving ministries, but by changing the decision mechanisms. Until the government has learned this, there will be many conflicts and many confrontations.

The political current out of which you come, Popular Disobedience, had many discussions with the Colombian political organization To Fight during the 1980s. There was an intense debate about new relations between the population and organizations and the concept of the Popular Power was considered. Would you say that Venezuela shows that political vanguards are unnecessary? That they can be replaced by networks?

I believe that collective vanguards are necessary; social vanguards that are not defined on the basis of a position of power. There are always vanguards in the sense that somebody always is first. But just because you take a step first, does not mean that soon everyone

else will follow you. You are in the vanguard not because you direct, but rather because others consider you as a reference. If a group establishes a community assembly and if this model is copied in other communities, the first group becomes a vanguard. The example multiplies because it works and because it helps the community to articulate itself. But here we are dealing with initiative and not control.

Assembly structures cannot completely replace political organization. In Venezuela such organizations do not exist. There are groups, but there are no national projects.

This is true. But there is an element that manages to unite these dispersed and diffuse movements: Chávez. He does not represent a vanguard, but the character of the masses of these movements. We, that is to say several political currents, began to say in the early 1990s that one should not construct political organizations, but hegemonic fields. Many have worked with this proposal—without organic structure, but with common criteria—in different areas: in the farmer and worker movements, the educational and socio-cultural networks, in the construction of solidaristic economy. In Venezuela, entire fields have been formed that reflect these hegemonic positions: the alternative media, for example. These are not centralized, but they are extensive. Clearly there are aspects that we could better administer centrally. We sometimes lack maturity in these areas. But nevertheless, the hegemonic field continues to grow.

In Colombia, there were many important publications about grassroots organizing, the barrios, and consciousness. As far as the conception of Popular Power, we owe much to the contribution of Colombians. But in Venezuela we managed to popularize these concepts. They have become part of a political practice and Hugo Chávez has become their spokesperson.

All this is a great civilizational and cultural triumph. In Venezuela, it has been demonstrated that a social process can begin without organic vanguards. It has been demonstrated that networks and movements in concrete conditions can replace parties and classic organizations.

It seems to me that another aspect is very important. In some areas here it has been possible to reconcile grassroots movements inspired by anarchism with a conception of a different state. In this way an answer to the historical conflict between local power and society is being designed. There are projects in Venezuela that demonstrate that it is possible to transcend the contradiction between self-governance and the state.

The popular constituent process must continue. With this state, we are not going to obtain anything. It is not just about replacing some civil servants. It is

necessary to destroy and to reconstruct this state. This reconstruction must generate new forms of local and participative power. Nobody can say if we are really going to achieve this. In our slightly imaginative analyses, we speak of a process that will last 20 to 30 years. Of course, we can be defeated and eliminated on the way. The decisive question is whether we will manage to change the correlations of power. We can observe processes in this direction. In the armed forces, for example, new attitudes and practices are being formed, which do not have anything to do with the traditional armed forces.

What is certain is that we are not going to make it alone. If this struggle is not continentalized, we can go home. The Bolivarian revolution is completely different from the Cuban process. Here there is no state socialism that can close in on itself. Our project filters through everywhere. It can only survive if it is not isolated. We emit light for other parts and we receive light from these other parts.

I would say that a constitution is always dead paper, a mixture between the guarantee of private property and failed promises of freedom. For you the Constitution is the center of the revolutionary project. Why?

There was no revolutionary organization that assumed the role of driving force. There were only insurrectionary movements—first of the masses [in 1989], then of the military [in 1992]. These movements were heterogenous, dispersed, fragmented. What united them was the project to develop a common foundation—the Constitution. Nobody had been able to centralize this movement around a program, not even Chávez. His leadership is unquestioned, but his ideas were not sufficient to unite the movement. The Constitution filled this emptiness. It is simultaneously a political program and a framework for the future of the process. In this sense, the Constitution is not a dead letter. It is a deeply libertarian and egalitarian constitution. Perhaps not sufficiently so. Perhaps we will have to reform it, perhaps it will no longer be necessary at some moment. But at this moment it plays the role of [Mao's] red book. It reflects the demands and the objectives of the popular movements.

But does it define the progressive content of new laws or is it that the political movement defends the Constitution as a symbol and decides on the new laws?

Both. Sure, the Constitution can also be useful for the right in some instances. But for me it is mainly didactic. Think about the million people who had never before discussed politics and that now read the Constitution. They are not most of the population, but they are a large minority. These people study, along

with the Constitution, a form of political thought that is very influenced by the ideas of social equality and social justice. In addition, the Constitution is a tool for struggle. The state revolves, by definition, around its Constitution. Thus, this one becomes a framework within which we can act.

It is an instance of consciousness raising, as a program, as a framework for action. Without the Constitution we would not have done anything. Chávez is not the center of this process. He is the communicator. The center consists of ideas and this is, in our case, the Constitution.

Will there be new coups? Will the paramilitary organizations extend?

Most probably the conflict will become more serious. If the imperial forces suffer a decisive defeat in their world-wide reconfiguration—for which lamentably there are not many indications—the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela will be able to survive for a while. But in this sense I am very pessimistic. The new power of the Empire is not eternal, but at least the next ten years will be terrible. If the Bolivarian process does not wear down through its own degradation by then and if the difficult, but productive relation between popular movements and government is maintained, a strong confrontation will occur. With the exception of Cuba and some other countries, Venezuela is the great anomaly in today's world—an anomaly that they want to erase from the map.

In the words of the opposition: "One must exterminate the Chavista sickness." For them this does not mean to exterminate ideas or to defeat a project at the ballot boxes, but to physically eliminate its protagonists. Unfortunately, the mass media have created a political subjectivity among the middle class that not only would salute the elimination of the Chavista movement, but that would also actively participate in it. This campaign has already begun. Paramilitary groups have assassinated over 70 peasant leaders in the past 3 years. Almost all the political murders of the past four years have been directed against those who support the government. Paradoxically, most of the murders against the opposition have been committed by the extreme right.

The question is if we will be able to stop this policy of extermination. In the past 18 months the popular movement defeated the right twice and in the armed forces at least there is a considerable sector that would resist an extreme right-wing offensive. **Z**

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